

# Building Relationships of Mutuality

A man asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” He asked not because he wanted to be neighborly but so he could put a limit on his friendships.

If we are honest, I suspect most of us have asked that question at one time or another. Hopefully our relationship with God, and the example of Jesus, has shifted the question to “Whom, God, should I intentionally be in relationship with and what should that relationship look like.”

Who are the people in your congregation or your acquaintance that Jesus may be prompting you to engage in relationship? Who has God called to be “the body of Christ” with you in your particular locale? Did your answer include individuals with disabilities in your congregation? Do you and other members of the congregation know these individuals? Are they involved in the life of the congregation, in its programs and ministries? Are these individuals considered when various programs or ministries are envisioned and implemented? Are barriers, which would hinder their participation, explored and addressed? Are individuals, who have disabilities, part of the church’s volunteer pool, asked how they would like to serve the church and encouraged and equipped to do so? Has your life, personally, and the life of your congregation been enriched by knowing an individual who has a disability and by their contribution to your congregation’s life?

The experience of far too many persons with disabilities in the church is that their presence is tolerated or perhaps acknowledged by a quick greeting that over the years has never gone deeper. It is easy to see why such individuals conclude that they are not really wanted or valued – that they are a stranger, always on the outside of the life of the congregation. Lonely - in the midst of the people of God.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of Jesus’ ministry was an acceptance and valuing of all persons AND searching out and being with those individuals who were considered outsiders – especially persons who had a disabling experience.

Sometimes a person with a disability may be “gushed over” and made a “special project” of well-meaning, but misinformed, parishioners. Being labeled and treated like a perpetual “care receiver” gets old and negates the image of God within the person, their gifts to share and contributions to make. What is most needed is not “specialized disability ministries” which can segregate individuals and keep them isolated from relationships with many in the congregation, but efforts that bring all individuals to an experience of “belonging” within in the everyday life of the congregation.

How can I be a neighbor to an individual(s) in my church who has a disability? Here are some guidelines:

- ❖ **Notice the presence of persons with disabilities in the life of your congregation.** Many times we are unaware that persons with disabilities are in our midst or, if they are not physically present, we don’t ask why that is and seek ways to invite them.

- ❖ **Make a choice to engage and to get to know the person as an individual.** Have a genuine spirit of inquiry and discovery (not of interrogation). Find out about their life, their hobbies, their daily routines, who the people in their life are (this may or may not include family members), if they have a job and what that entails, what their dreams and goals are.

~**Expect to see and to welcome God's spirit and image in that individual.** As you see and experience the beauty of who they are, share that with them. We need others to help reveal to us our beauty and what contributions we make in this world. This is especially true for individuals who have experienced a lot of isolation and/or been ridiculed or put down by others.

~ **Listen to the person.** This will probably be the biggest gift that you can give. Your willingness to slow down, to focus on the individual and to be attentive will speak volumes about the way you value the person. Persons with disabilities often have the experience of others (family members, professional caregivers, doctors, physical therapists/occupational therapists, job coaches, etc.) making decisions that will affect their lives and determining what they can and cannot do. Help give the individual ownership of their own life and that what they think and feel matters. Respect their personal preferences (don't select their cookies at coffee hour for them, let them choose their own). Notice when they are responsive and when they are frustrated. What works and what doesn't work?

~ **Listen to those who know the individual well.** Engage these individuals in troubleshooting any barriers that the individual is encountering (which may include asking that the caregiver accompany the individual with a disability to church activities to facilitate their optimal participation).

~ **It is respectful to use "people first language"** (see the PDC website, 2004 Access Sunday materials, "People First Language" article) rather than referring to the person based on their diagnoses and to use the language of friendship rather than language of service (i.e. care recipient). Remember that friendship is a higher value than charity. Think of "ministry *with*" rather than "ministry *to*." Be aware of guidelines for "*disability etiquette*" which can assist you in responding to the individual in positive ways. A good resource is "Welcoming People with Disabilities: Do's and Don'ts" by Marilyn Bishop, available through the National Pastoral Life Center, New York, NY

- ❖ **Be mindful of people first language and disability etiquette guidelines, but most important, engage with the individual.** Persons with disabilities will most often overlook "mistakes" if they see that you are genuinely interested in them as an individual. **Relax and be yourself!**

~ **See the person as gifted, because they are made in the image of God, rather than as deficient or limited based on their disabling condition.** See the article "Who is Sarah? Two Perspectives of Viewing Persons with Disabilities" in this packet for reflection on how the lens with which we view a person can stereotype a person and create discriminating circumstances or it can open up hearts for acceptance of the individual and generate opportunities for the individual's gifts to be contributed.

- ❖ **Let the individual get to know you.** People become friends through shared activities. So, share your life and hobbies, goals and dreams. Find areas of common interest. Engage in activity outside of church – go out to lunch together, to a movie, sporting event or participate in a hobby together. Invite them to visit you in your home, if possible, and get to know your family. Share in holiday celebrations together. **Have fun together!**

~ **Seek to create an *authentic relationship*** where you are both who you really are. Engage in “*give and take.*” Friends, only occasionally, give advice and don’t endeavor to “fix each other” but may brainstorm, troubleshoot and network together in order to glean from the other person another perspective, insight, experience and connection.

~ **Know that *friendships take time*** to develop and grow over time. And, true friendships don’t happen with everyone.

~ **Endeavor to develop a long-term relationship.** Many persons with disabilities have people who are involved in their life for only a short period of time (they leave when the “need” is solved) and/or have been abandoned by their family or friends. It is more important to be a long-term friend than an “intense friend” for a short duration. In fact, it is better to build relationships slowly and increase the time spent with the person over time than to start out spending a lot of time together and then cut back dramatically on your time together. You may need to be clear about your boundaries so that you can be positive about the time commitment that the relationship involves. If you do too much you will probably not do it for very long or will be involved grudgingly and soon might not want to be involved at all. Then the other person might feel that you too have “abandoned” them and that they are not good enough to maintain a friendship.

- ❖ **Invite the individual to join you in attending an activity in the church** that you have found to be particularly meaningful. Introduce them to others in the congregation and help them build connections with others. Endeavor to help the individual experience a sense of belonging and that his/her presence and involvement in the church matters.
- ❖ **Find out why they chose to come to your church and what their experience has been like.** Are they involved in the ways they want to be? Are there any volunteer roles that they would like to serve in? Sometimes persons with disabilities have not had many (or any) prior volunteer experiences and need assistance in brainstorming their interests and gifts. Help them understand what it means to serve as a faithful volunteer and explore various opportunities for volunteer involvement. Consider being involved in volunteer projects together.

**“We know that each time a person feels needed, essential to another, the threads of interaction are reinforced, and the fabric which holds us together as church and society is strengthened and reinforced.”**

Mary Jane Owen, National Catholic Partnership on Disability

- ❖ **Inquire if they are experiencing any barriers to involvement in the church and troubleshoot ways to address these barriers.** Involve the individual in “voicing” their need and working out solutions rather than taking the situation on yourself as a problem to solve or a need to meet.

~ **Be attentive to whether the individual is experiencing the “typical experience” at your church.** Are they included on the church mailing list? Even if they do not read or speak, individuals like to get mail, and mail can be a symbol of inclusion. Is the individual invited to special events/classes and to join small groups? Are they asked to bring a food donation (perhaps it is chips or soft drinks) to the church potluck? Are they asked to participate in meaningful volunteer service?

~ **Are “reasonable accommodations” being addressed?**

~ **Allow for individuality.**

- ❖ **Consider starting a “Circle of Friends”** with the individual with a disability to provide a network of friends to celebrate life together, to provide support, encouragement, the sharing of dreams and goals, brainstorming and troubleshooting how to make movement towards their dreams and goals (See the PDC website – [www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc](http://www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc) - 2004 Access Sunday materials, “Circles of Friends: A Congregational Model of Care” for information). A Circle of Friends is a wonderful way to build a network of relationships with persons with different personalities, interests, time availability, etc. It can be helpful to know that you are not the only friend that the individual has, as well as the friendship and support for your own life.
- ❖ **Expect for your own life to be touched, in deep ways, by your relationship.** That individual (including those who have developmental disabilities or those who are non-verbal) will teach you things and expand your world and your experience with God. Read the Sunday Access article “How God touched me and taught me through...” by Rev. Andrew Smith, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama, for one testimonial of the impact that persons with disabilities have had on the life of this pastor.

**“If cultivating friendship means doing things such as giving priority to relationship; being open with feelings, thoughts and affections; practicing acceptance; learning the gestures and touches of warmth; listening; and seeing in every stranger a potential friends, then “we” [persons without disabilities] are the learners from “them” [persons with developmental disabilities].”**

Rev. Bill Gaventa

“Gift and Call: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Friendships”

Lives change when a relationship develops where previously there was none. It is amazing the impact that affection and being valued has on individuals. We are transformed and enriched by relationships of mutuality. All kind of blessings flow when we become neighbors, one with the other.

**“Who comes into a person’s life may be the single greatest factor of influence to what that life becomes.”**

Robert Kegan,

“The Evolving Self, Problem, and Process in Human Development”

Rev. Donna Whitmore, Bridge Ministries